

# FULL VALUE

ISABEL SUPPÉ | ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANDREAS SCHMIDT



PAIN WRAPS ME IN INFINITE LAYERS and draws me with it into a confusing place between reality and some undefined dimension, where there's just a single certainty: I'm alive. I feel the warmth of the bedcovers and the clean sheets on my skin, and I know that they are real. The sounds of the nurses' steps are real. The needles in my arms are real. The drips are also real.

Every time a nurse arrives at my bedside with a syringe, she makes me float somewhere beyond pain and memory. The world becomes blurry, and when I return to the touch of the sheets, it might all have been a bad dream. But then the same pain that tells me I'm alive also tells me that Peter is dead.

NOW, ONE YEAR AFTER I woke up in the hospital, I sometimes forget. Panting, I concentrate on nothing except my ice axes and crampons. I struggle upward, swing by swing, through the slightly overhanging world of wonder and blue ice, on the final ropelength of our new route. Beyond the summit ridge of Serkhe Khollu, the Bolivian Andes merge once again into the dark velvet horizon. Illuminated by thousands of stars, they silently withstand storms violent enough to carry away everything but their beauty.

"Happy birthday," my climbing partner Robert says, and I remember the crutches I've left at the bottom of the face. My turquoise crutches that will allow me to leave the magic realm of the vertical, where I can climb as if I'd never fallen, never shattered my foot. I remember Ala Izquierda, that other mountain in the Cordillera Real, and that last pitch I didn't climb.

A YEAR AGO, on this same day, on July 29, 2010, Peter and I are 400 meters above the ground on Ala Izquierda's Southeast Face. Everything is still intact. We've talked so much about dozens, maybe hundreds of climbs we want to do. In the land of imagination, the future shines bright ahead of us, not yet mutilated by splinters and sutures.

Then all those plans and dreams begin to fall. Peter has gone one step too far. And another step. I've told him that the anchors are bad, that

he has to be careful. But Peter wants to find a more comfortable place: he's afraid to slip. Horrified, I watch him move above the anchors. I open my mouth to tell him to come back.

The crampon scratches as it slides over the ice without going in. The anchors blow out, and the ice explodes. *It's over.* Four hundred meters to the ground. Between here and the glacier, there is only ice and almost-vertical rock. At the bottom, a bergschrund waiting to swallow our bodies.

With a screech, the rope tears me from the face, and I know that it is tearing me apart from life. The world has been turned off. I fall through darkness. I try to hit my axe into ice I cannot see, even though I know death is unavoidable. I feel quiet, as if curled up inside a body I no longer recognize as mine, in the midst of a cosmic storm. I am quiet in the middle of a universe that bursts around me. Against me. I hear explosions. I feel remote blows. I wait for the next one that will leave me unconscious.

The cosmos starts slowing down. There must be a mistake. It can't be slowing down while I continue thinking. I must be dead. I died up there, when the hiss of the rope ripped me from the face, when I passed the threshold of terror. I have fallen through absolute darkness because the universe has been turned off. I fell, and I died.

THEN THERE'S NO DOUBT: We have stopped. We have stopped, and I am alive. Lost, shaken, and breathing somewhere between the cold and the hard, crusty ice. What I don't know is that this is just the beginning. I want to get up and see Peter, who is lying in a place that must be behind me and who doesn't move. I need to see that he is alive. I cannot return to life without him. When I stand, my right foot slides away under the weight of my leg. I fall backward into an expanding wave of pain.

I can feel my toes. And if it's just sprained? A broken foot equals death. I try again to get up, and once again I find myself on the ice. My foot has become a slippery mass that doesn't obey me anymore, that slips away, that will continue slipping away even if I succeed in denying the pain.

A snore. Peter is snoring. He is alive, and he is snoring. A sob mixed with laughter bubbles up inside me. But there is no time for sobs. To preserve this vestige of life that snores I have to get him back to firm soil. His leg is strangely twisted, his face stained with blood. He talks, but he doesn't seem to be speaking

to me, and I know that only I can go for help.

I begin. Crawling on my knees and sometimes dragging myself forward in a seated position, I struggle through penitentes. Each movement explodes with pain. I anchor my desperate longing in the rock island ahead.

My right crampon gets stuck in the ice, and the pain is like a cloudburst of lightning. It confirms what I already know: I've broken my right leg; the dimensions of time and distance have been fractured with my bones. What would have been meters have transformed into insurmountable barriers of penitentes. After several eternities, dusk is falling. The friction between my knees and the ice becomes unbearable. The temperature is dropping, and whenever I stop, my knees stick to the ice.

I have to reach the rocks and insulate myself from the ice if I want to live through the night. To make things worse, it is a rather flat island. There isn't even a rock big enough to protect me from the storm.

Exhausted, I sit on my rucksack and hug myself. The showers of lightning cease, and only the leaden exhaustion remains. Peter is still sitting in the same place. He's talking, and sometimes I can see him moving his arms. He needs my help, and there's nothing I can do for him tonight.

I look up at the face where I just died: a majestic, beautiful mountain rises in front of me. Even the stars in the Andean sky that shine on it are beautiful. *Beautiful to live*, not to die. What I cannot come to understand is how I can possibly be contemplating the place where I died. It seems absurd to be admiring those stars that continue being beautiful and immaculate. In the place where we died, there remains only beauty.

I decide to live tonight, tomorrow, the day after, and the day after that, to retain my body's warmth, my breath. I rub my arms and legs. A coldness that comes from deep within, maybe from an abyss in my soul, is shaking me. It would be so easy to lie down, to fall asleep, to give in. But I have decided to live. I have to live. I've already died. I have to thwart the leaden exhaustion that is lurking inside me, that turns around me in narrowing circles like a scavenger. I push my trekking pole into the snow and lean my head on it. If I fall asleep, my head will slide off, and the jolt will startle me back into the fight.

IT RISES. Finally, the sun rises. I don't know after how many jolts, but at last the darkness

begins to thin out. The ridge that divides the world of ice from the valley remains solitary. Even though we have been missing since last night, I feel that no rescue will come today.

I don't even have duct tape to splint my leg. And even if I did, I doubt that I would manage to walk. My foot has swollen so much I can barely move my toes. They're cold, but I can still feel that they are there. A doctor will have to take care of the rest. I can't afford to lose time if I want Peter to live, if I want to live. There is only one option: crawling.

I try to crawl, but the sharp pain in my knees becomes unbearable. I try to move on despite the pain, and I jolt around. I fall sideways and crash into the penitentes. My injured foot smashes against the ice, and I find myself under a multicolored shower of lightning. I can't understand why my knees hurt so much, whether it's just because of the abrasive surface of the ice, or whether I've injured something else. All I know is that I have to find a new technique to move. I sit down with my legs stretched out in front of me. I stick the end of my trekking pole below the strap that fastens my right crampon to my boot, and I lift my foot over the penitentes. The bolts of lightning come back in rainbow hues. The snow turns red. It's blood, my blood, that has fallen onto the snow. Bright red, arterial blood. For it to have dripped out of my shoe, my boot must be full of blood. Otherwise, my socks and the insulation material would have absorbed it.

I think of applying a hemostatic binding. But if I diminish the circulation, I might get frostbite on my toes, maybe freeze my entire foot. I need this foot to climb other faces. Besides, I can't have damaged a large artery or I'd already be in shock. I decide to go for all or nothing, and I drag myself over the next step. The lightning returns. I think of taking more Diclofenac. Yet I know that I'm badly dehydrated. If the pills make me throw up, I'll get even weaker. I cannot get weaker if I want to live.

I decide to take the lightning for company during my traverse. I've managed only three steps when I look behind toward my rock island. I wonder whether it makes sense to lose so much blood and progress so little. We've been missing since last night. Carlos, our driver, must have called La Paz. But what if he hasn't? What if my presentiment is right and nobody has come today simply because nobody is on the way? In that case Peter is going to die; I am going to die, unless I



continue. I decide to keep on dragging myself over the ice, perhaps for nothing.

INEXORABLY, THE NEXT NIGHT COMES. Its deadly shadow has caught me on the ice. A hundred meters from the rock shore opposite Ala Izquierda. I'm still infinitely far away from the scree slope that leads up to the col, but I have almost crossed the glacier. Almost. Just a hundred meters if only my foot would obey me. But it won't, and I cannot keep on dragging myself over the ice because my pants are instantly freezing to it after each move. The ice is draining me of warmth, and I simply do not have strength to continue. Exhausted, I sit on my rucksack and lean my head on my trekking pole.

With the night, the jolts have returned. Violent jolts of my head sliding off the trekking pole and lacerating my overtired mind. The first star emerges above the grey ridge while the sky is transforming into velvet. Suddenly I note that it's a headlamp, not a star. A faint figure moves under the light. It walks over the col and begins descending toward me. Its arms and legs grow gigantic. With each step, they become more immense and disproportionate. I start to be less certain that the figure is approaching me. Suddenly I'm no longer tired. I desperately need to chain this figure to reality. I turn on my headlamp. I stand on my left foot. I shout. I wave my arms. It's seen me. The nightmare is over.

The figure continues descending while remaining in the same place. I don't understand. I shout until I have no voice left. I make desperate light signals to catch the attention of the figure, to force it to be real. No one is descending from the ridge. The distant headlamp is merely a star. Empty and deceived, I sit on my rucksack. I lean my head on my trekking pole and close my eyes.

Another jolt. When I lift my head, two lights are walking over the ridge. Fifteen minutes, twenty at most, until they'll reach me. They'll cover me with a down blanket during the evacuation. They'll have thermoses full of hot tea with lots of sugar. I won't have to rub my arms and legs anymore, and if I fall asleep on the stretcher, it won't matter. They're going to take care of Peter and I'll be able to rest.

I know that I'm hallucinating, that I have hypothermia and that I'm not even shaking anymore because my body has used up all its reserves of glucose. I'm surprised to be so conscious of my situation. While I've struggled across the ice, Peter has gotten quite small



behind me, and I haven't seen him move in a while. Instead of deceiving me, the hallucinations only affirm the presence of death.

All of a sudden, I find myself at the same stuffy café full of cigarette smoke in the Plaza Avaroa of La Paz, where I've devoured hundreds of blueberry cheesecakes and dreamed of mountains and big vertical faces. The café is crammed with people, and there is only one free table. It's round and made of dark, shiny wood. But it's too small for my order. Two strawberry milkshakes, one banana milkshake, two large orange juices, two large lattes and a blueberry cheesecake. I don't know whether to begin with the citric freshness of the orange juice or the foamy texture of the milkshakes. I'll save the cheesecake for later. My entire order might not be enough for my thirst.

While I try to make up my mind, the table disappears, the café disappears, and I'm once again on the glacier. I only need to raise my head to see that the gigantic figures are still there. I look at my watch: the night has only just begun. I rest my head on my pole and return to the café. Again and again, my order arrives. I don't see the waitress. I only see the cups, the spoons, the milkshakes. I smell the orange's fruity perfume. I'll start with the juices, alternate with the milkshakes and finish with the coffees. Afterward, I'll order more. I've only ordered so little because there isn't enough room on my table.

I don't know how many times I have glanced at my watch. How many times I have

reached for my milkshake, when I note that there are no more lights on the ridge. The stars are higher up, now, and the figures appear without headlamps. They walk in the dark when their legs begin to grow. I'm startled when I realize I'm gazing at the starry sky over the Condoriri massif and that I'm still moved by its beauty. It's a cold and windy night, and yet it's too beautiful to die.

THE CONTRAST between earth and sky has inverted: the dark ridge distinguishes itself from the greyness that announces dawn. Even in the early daylight, the figures keep walking over the ridge. They appear more real now than they did in the darkness. The air is still icy; I can't waste my warmth shouting at the hallucinations. I decide to look away, not let the figures seduce me.

As if hypnotized, I keep watching the ridge and suddenly I know: this time the figures are human, this time they are real. I am going to live. I start moving my arms. I'm not tired anymore. I'm not cold anymore. There is just a single certainty: I am going to live.

A YEAR LATER, I set off to celebrate my first birthday by climbing Serkhe Kholu. But first, I need to do something very important: blueberry cheesecake and a latte at the Alexander Coffee in La Paz with Dr. Alejandro Reyes Carrillo, who saved my right foot. He also saved my boot. I never quite understood why he obeyed me when I told him to get two strong men to hold me and remove the boot in one piece. "I need it to climb other mountains," I said. That was when he knew I was going to come back. Even though my foot was half torn off, and my bones had been sticking out for almost three days, and in spite of all his medical knowledge indicating otherwise, he understood that I was going to climb again.

"Yes, you will," the Bolivian surgeon says after the first operation, "But it won't be easy." He is right. It takes ten highly complicated surgeries, a journey to Germany and all the passion in me to defy the German doctors' pronouncement that I won't ever climb again, that I might not even walk normally again. I look up from my cast and tell them, "I went climbing yesterday," I know that I'm right. If I can climb with just one foot, I will only climb better once I can use both again. Crutch-walking back to Serkhe Kholu's base camp, I smile. ■

[Abridged by the author from her book *Starry Night*—Ed.]